



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Driven to DiscoverSM

Janet Campbell Hale

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In my four-year-old's mind I believed reading and writing worked more or less like this: The writer, when she makes the marks upon the paper, must concentrate very, very hard, must put everything she has into this making of marks, must think the thoughts deeply and intensely, because it would be through this intensity that the thoughts of the writer would be transformed from the writer's mind onto the paper. Then . . . a reader could come along and pick up the paper and look at these marks and the reader could feel and think as the writer had when the writer wrote on the pages . . . I think that that was not very different from the way I would write later on, after I had learned to read and write in the conventional sense.

— Bloodlines: Odyssey of a Native Daughter

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1946
- * Native-American novelist and memoirist
- * Published her first book, *The Owl's Song*, in 1974

This page was researched and submitted by Maria-Theresia Holub on 6/9/98.

Biography

The youngest of four daughters, Hale grew up on the Yakima reservation in Central Washington and the Coeur d'Alene reservation in northern Idaho, where she currently resides. She had to move often from one place to another, sometimes with her whole family, mostly only with her mother, who tried to escape her violent, alcoholic husband. Due to numerous changes of residence in her childhood, Hale not only frequently had to leave new friends behind, but as she states: "The constant uprooting would have been enough. But then there was also the verbal abuse. I was not normal, [my mother] liked to tell me. She mocked the way I walked and talked . . . Sometimes the smallest thing would set her off" (*Bloodlines*, 40).



Janet Campbell Hale

Biography continued

Feeling unaccepted by her family, writing soon became a refuge for Hale. As a teenager, she started expressing herself “in poetry no one would ever read” (*Bloodlines*, 4). At the age of 23, she was not only already through with her first marriage and mother of a six-year-old boy, but she had also finished writing her first book, *The Owl’s Song*.

After a period of permanent struggle for survival, Hale’s situation improved when she was accepted at the University of California, Berkeley, where she received a B.A. in 1974. She attended law school at Berkeley and Gonzaga Law School in Spokane, Washington, and in 1984 she also received an M.A. in English from the University of California, Davis.

In her next novel, *The Jailing of Cecelia Capture*, which was published the following year, Hale’s themes were living on welfare, single-motherhood, disrupted families, racism, and identity struggle.

The story begins in jail, where Cecelia Capture, a young Native American woman is kept for drunk driving and - as it turns out later - for welfare fraud she committed years ago in order to be able to survive as a young, poor single mother. In her prison cell, Cecelia reminisces about her childhood, with a father constantly drunk and a mother who tries to get rid of her frustration over an unhappy marriage by intimidating and humiliating Cecelia. Trying to escape her mother’s tyranny, Cecelia moves to San Francisco, but soon is confronted with another problem when she, still a teenager and without a permanent job or higher education, gets pregnant.

Treated as an inferior not only by her mother but also by the men in her life (including her white husband), Cecelia struggles to make her way as a Native American woman in modern society. Her name “Capture” (derived from her grandfather’s name “Eagle Capture”) has a double meaning, since it does not only refer to her family. Cecelia really is a prisoner, explicitly for drunk driving, but she is also “captured” in the vicious cycle of her life, her constant oppression at the hands of others. She realizes that she is in danger of repeating her mother’s fate: “She was a prisoner now, as [her mother] had been, of circumstance and an inability to imagine anything beyond the prison, to create anything different for herself” (*Cecilia Capture*, 176).



Janet Campbell Hale

Biography continued

Out of prison, with nothing left to hope or fight for, Cecelia can think of only one way to end her dilemma. But Hale's book offers a different solution from what one might expect, making her novel thus not only the story of a failure, but also of a new beginning.

For *Bloodlines: Odyssey of a Native Daughter* (1993), Hale received an American Book Award in 1994. In six chapters of the book she combines memories of her childhood/teenage years with stories from her recent past, following the idea of other Native American writers (like Leslie Marmon Silko) that time is not linear, but an ocean. At one point she talks about her childhood with her labile, alcoholic father and her unfair, bitter and cynical mother, only to switch a minute later to a scene in hospital, where she affectionately tells of her last meeting with her mother at her mother's deathbed.

Hale also dedicates a chapter to her Irish great-great-grandfather, Dr. John McLaughlin, a man still celebrated as the founder of Oregon, whose only "offense" (according to public opinion of that time) seems to be the marriage to an Indian woman. Indirectly, he is also to blame for Hale's identity crisis as a teenage girl, since she is constantly told by her mother that this white ancestor is the one her daughter should be proud of, thus instilling the notion in her that being Indian is not something to be proud of.

Hale writes characters who move beyond roles as victims to become survivors -- strong, independent women who not only come to terms with, but also learn to be proud of, their heritage. As she writes: "Sometimes it will take a lot of courage to live and do well in spite of it all. But being courageous is part of your heritage. The most admired quality among the Coeur d'Alene ["coeur d'alene" is French for "heart of steel"] was courage. Courage has been bred into you. It's in your blood" (*Bloodlines*, xxi).



Janet Campbell Hale

Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

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